Women and Gender in the Bible and the Biblical World
Editorial

Sarah Nicholson, Zanne Domoney-Lyttle*

Women and Gender in the Bible and the Biblical World: Editorial Introduction

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In the introduction to her lengthy volume on reading the women of the Bible, Tikva Frymer-Kensky asks: "[h]ow can a book that teaches the common divine origin of all humanity and the sacred nature of each human being reflect a social order in which women are systematically disadvantaged and subordinated?"[1] Neither the question nor the answer are straightforward, but it is a question which has been asked in many forms and many times before and since Frymer-Kensky first posed it and which has its roots in the first chapter of the book of Genesis. When God first creates humans in the garden, he does so without prejudice or preference (cf. Gen. 1:27). In fact, the Hebrew suggests a singular creation of humans by God:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם׃

"So God created the human in his image, in the image of God he created it; male and female he created them."[2]

Most translations render this verse in the masculine: "So God created the human in his image, in the image of God he created *him*; male and female he created them," but this is a somewhat questionable translation. As Robert Alter notes, in Gen. 1:27 the pronoun "him" is grammatically masculine but not anatomically masculine, therefore the creation of humans is synchronous, not separated.[3] Yet, our stubborn history of translating that verse in the masculine has set in stone an ideology in which men are created first and women second.[4] As such, a social hierarchy is conceived in which women are supposedly inferior to men. The second account of creation exacerbates this (cf. Gen. 2:7–25). Here, man *is* created first, and woman is formed from his rib by God, in much the same way that potters create forms with their hands. Woman is created as a "helper" for the man (Gen. 2:18), though this too is a notoriously difficult passage to translate and has been interpreted as "helpmeet" (KJV), "sustainer"[5] or sometimes "a helper against him."[6] The identity of man's helper leads to gendered connotations in which woman exists not only in a position secondary to man, but in a role which functions to serve him. These short passages from the book of Genesis have been used not only to implement and uphold a hierarchical social structure in which man occupies the

1 Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, xiii.
2 Translation our own.
3 Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, 5. See also: Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman*, 124–6.
4 See Simkins, "Gender Construction in the Yahwist Creation Myth," 32–3; Lanser, "(Feminist) Criticism in the Garden," 68; Navarro-Puerto, "Divine Image and Likeness," 193. For an overview of the history of feminist interpretation of Eve, see: Scholz, "Eve's Daughter's Liberated?" 33–42.
5 Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, 9.
6 Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman*, 127.

* **Corresponding author: Zanne Domoney-Lyttle,** University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Nothern Ireland, e-mail: zanne.domoney-lyttle@glasgow.ac.uk
Sarah Nicholson: University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Nothern Ireland, e-mail: sarah.nicholson@glasgow.ac.uk

apex and women are secondary, but they are also frequently used to enforce an ideology that gender is a binary construct therefore challenging and excluding the idea that there exists a multiplicity of genders. The history of interpretation and reception of Gen. 1:27 is a blood-soaked and troubling one which has been used to subordinate and oppress not only women, but trans communities, nonbinary people and anyone who does not fit neatly into the binary of man and woman.

Frymer-Kensky's question draws upon this history, alluding to that first creation narrative in respect to the idea of a "common divine origin of all humanity."[7] The second part of her question relates to that second creation narrative when a social order is imposed upon humanity. In it is a call-to-arms, an indictment against hetero-patriarchal assumptions, and an inducement to think deeply about the ways in which the sacred texts of the Bible have been used to subjugate those who have been deemed inferior or non-conforming. It is hoped that such deep thought will spur the thinker into actions which may challenge that hierarchical system, and this special issue of *Open Theology* is one of the results of our thinking about this subject.

Our aim in curating this special issue of *Open Theology* was to encourage a multiplicity of voices and a range of responses which might consider a wide variety of themes and topics, but which would all connect via a singular focus: that of women and gender in the Bible and the biblical world in ways which speak to a history of both the subjugation and liberation of women's voices from the pages of the Bible. We were not disappointed. From articles on the reception of biblical women in culture (cf. Domoney-Lyttle, Koplowitz-Breier) to issues of social justice such as exploitative marriages in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Loader), to political and social issues relating to identity (cf. Quine, Kozlova), questions raised by historically androcentric translations of the Bible (cf. Hartmann), and reading beyond cisnormative gendering in Genesis (cf. Henderson-Merrygold), the special issue considers the fluidity of gender and ways of constructing our humanity beyond a rigid gender binary.

Some collections attempt to gather together papers on a specific theme or topic. That was not our intention: beyond the undefined descriptors "women," "gender" and "Bible" we did not seek to impose any further structure on the collection. So many narrowly defined collections in academic publishing represent androcentric interests and this leads women scholars – and perhaps queer scholars – to encounter difficulties getting their work published. We were keen to encourage submissions that might not fit neatly into projects being conducted elsewhere (we also have some questions about categorisation as an androcentric project which, intentionally or unintentionally, excludes the female, the feminine and the gender-fluid). Nevertheless, we notice the emergence of some common themes that reflect the current concerns of scholars working in these broadly defined areas.

In the first article of this special issue, Koplowitz-Breier explores the work of five poets who retell the story of Jephthah's daughter (Judg. 11:30–40) in her own words, giving her a voice and an emotional dimension. Recent Jewish women's poetry instantiates a tradition of remembering Jephthah's daughter as she is supposed to be remembered, according to the biblical text. She has no name in Judges, and no progeny to tell her story. Her life, either ended by sacrifice or circumscribed by confinement, receives a midrashic re-visioning in which these women poets claim a place in traditional ways of constructing interpretation. Such a move centres Jephthah's nameless daughter in her own story but also draws attention to the contributions which Jewish American women/feminists have made and continue to make with regards to interpreting difficult biblical texts. This article speaks to the cultural location of those female poets who have sought to re-envision Judg. 11:30–40, as well as the cultural afterlife of Jephthah's daughter and the result is emotionally engaging and significant.

The theme of cultural locations of women is also presented in Loader's article on the intersection of social justice, gender and the Bible. The striking and slightly unsettling opening sentences of Loader's article are indicative of his exhortation to pay careful attention to the Bible's culturally located understanding of the status of women. "Acknowledging the difference in nature and status did not mean any less respect or love," he writes (289), and yet of course this sentiment has been the basis for evangelical

7 Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, xiii.

constructions of the family in which ideas of complementarianism and male headship are encouraged in the family and replicated in the church. Women's submission to male authority is not just encouraged but required and policed in ways that are neither respectful nor loving. However, Loader's point is that the biblical construction of the fundamental inferiority of women cannot be legitimately ignored: it is important to take scripture seriously, and to listen to how it reflects ancient understandings of sexual behaviour as well as of the status of women. Therefore, enacting social justice – a "core value" of scripture (293) – in the here-and-now rests on understanding today's constructions of sex and sexual orientation as "new situations and new knowledge" (293). Drawing a parallel with the early church's discourses about circumcision, Loader anticipates protest at such an approach to the Bible, but responding helpfully to "the genuinely gay" (293) may be best served in this way.

Quine draws attention to the little-explored instances of the absence of maternal grief in 1–2 Kings in contrast to narratives in which maternal grief is a key part of the story. Grieving mothers in 1–2 Kings are unnamed and non-royal, whereas named royal women do not grieve at the deaths of their sons. Indeed, these queen mothers are presented as non-maternal and masculine, consistent in character – but not in narrative appraisal – with Assyrian narratives of royal womanhood. In this way, 1–2 Kings critiques the political system "by elevating motherhood over queenship" (408). Although the stories of unnamed grieving women are traditionally understood as stories about kings and male prophets, the contrast with named royal women exposes an ideology which constructs devotion to children as quintessentially maternal. Thus, Bathsheba's (indirectly expressed) grief for her dead son in 2 Samuel constructs her character's narrative approval, whereas Maacah's introduction of an Asherah, taken together with the absence of a description of maternal grief for the death of Abijam, implies an illegitimate claim to authority. Jezebel's usurping of monarchical authority is even more clearly coded masculine, underlined by implication in her failure to mourn her husband or show maternal concern for two sons in life-threatening circumstances: she is "polemically portrayed as illegitimate in both genders" (416). And Athaliah's extraordinary performance of masculinity, wiping out a whole house in order to reign by herself, presents her as "an anti-mother" (417) who also cannot fulfil the masculine role of ruling and is appropriately slain without burial. These contrasts with the unnamed, non-royal, appropriately grieving mothers constitute a "narratological politics" (417) which seeks "to redefine female royal power" (418) and to undermine the legitimacy of gender fluid performances of that power.

In the next article, Henderson-Merrygold uses a reader-response approach to consider the effect of assuming gender by means of introductory glances, thereby finding in Sarai's characterisation the possibility of a gender-diverse reading. The inconsistency of Sarai's presentation is rationalised by third parties in attempts to reposition her "in the cis normative world" (498), but these attempts inevitably fail and serve to highlight more clearly the instability of narrative constructions of her gender. Thus, the concentration of the male gaze (Abraham, the Egyptian men and Pharaoh himself) on Sarai's feminine beauty cannot be sustained: Sarai must slip out of view for her own safety in case her beauty is misread as mimicry, and she loses her name behind designations of her relationship to men. Her beauty is subject to racialised expectations in addition to gendered expectations, allowing her to "typify hegemonic beauty standards" (503) which play to gendered expectations while also exposing their white supremacist basis. However, it is Sarai's childlessness that arouses significant cispicion: Abram's willingness to give up his wife to another man's harem becomes intelligible through an understanding that both he and Sarai are fully aware of her inability to have children. Sarai refuses to confirm or deny expectations about her gender, maintaining an incomprehensibility that not even the attempt at retcon in Genesis 20 can overcome despite its introduction of new information about Sarah's background – because this construction of cisnormative presuppositions is simultaneously obvious and unstable.

In her paper which focuses on comic book adaptations of the story and figure of Rebekah in Gen. 24:15–67 and 25:19–28, Domoney-Lyttle also explores themes relating to the construction of identity but in reference to the cultural afterlives of biblical women. Traditional biblical scholarship (in the shape of historical criticism, form criticism, source criticism and so forth) has often perpetuated limited ideas of the role and function of women in the Bible. While feminist criticisms have gone some way to challenge more conservative and conventional scholarship, Domoney-Lyttle argues contemporary retellings like

comic books offer the chance to revisit and challenge dominant ideologies pertaining to women and gender since they are well-positioned to "undercut the monopolisation of traditional scholarship" (570). Such an argument takes into account not only the social and cultural location of the biblical text, but the position of the comic books creator and the reader of the comic book. Therefore, such contemporary retellings are part of a reception history of the Bible which seek to understand how meaning is made *from* biblical texts, rather than *in* biblical texts.

Kozlova's article does investigate the ways in which meaning has been sought *in* biblical texts, in reference to midrashic derivations of Hebrew names (MDN's). Taking issue with the scholarly tendency to understand Rahab's name in terms sexual innuendo based in the narrative's description of her as a sex worker, Kozlova advances a compelling alternative: the name suggests Yhwh's promise to Israel of breadth of territory at the point of their entry into Canaan. The principle of *nomen est omen*, the idea that a name is indicative of some aspect of a person's status or character, is familiar throughout the ancient world, and the literature of the Hebrew Bible is no exception. Since the spies and the king of Jericho remain unnamed, Rahab's name takes on a particular significance. The verbal derivation connotes breadth or wideness which has been interpreted with prurient synecdoche as a reference to Rahab's anatomy, even though it is masculine in form. This detail suggests a more likely theophoric origin involving a Canaanite deity on the model of רְחַבְיָהוּ in which the breadth of the land (rather than Rahab's body) is suggested. In this way, the name picks up on themes of land and Torah from the immediate context Joshua 1, and also reflected throughout the book. Acknowledging postcolonial readings of the narrative, Kozlova notes the linking of Rahab to the Torah via the Deuteronomic formula in Joshua 2:11: a form of words spoken elsewhere only by Moses and Solomon. Her role in liberation places her "in co-operation with, and as a proxy for, YHWH himself" (583).

The naming (or anonymising) of biblical women is a significant area of study in biblical scholarship which can illuminate or reframe the reader's perception of women characters as demonstrated by Kozlova. Though it is an area of study which has been discussed elsewhere,[8] little attention has been paid to the subject of the next article, by Hartmann. Hartmann's focus is on the grammatical nuances of translating IOYNIAN in Rom. 16:7 since it can be either feminine or masculine (i.e. Junia or Junias). Most frequently, the name has been translated in its masculine form since scholars have struggled to reconcile someone labelled as "outstanding among the apostles" (Rom. 16:7) with the feminine for a variety of reasons including androcentric perspectives on the role of women in both the church and home life. Hartmann argues, however, that IOYNIAN is most likely feminine. The significance of this article is the way in which Hartmann carefully traces the history of translation of Junia/Junias linking it to contemporaneous perspectives of the social and domestic role of women. It is only with evidentiary-based scholarship that a conclusive argument is made to overturn those centuries of prejudice allowing Junia to emerge as the most realistic translation. Such a study is demonstrative of the ways in which biblical scholarship must continue to be scrutinised through a variety of perspectives if we are to challenge heteropatriarchal assumptions about women and gender in the texts of the Bible.

As the reader can see, this special issue of *Open Theology* is broad in scope but deeply explores various aspects of biblical women in the texts of the Bible and their afterlives. Of significance is the fact that many of the papers deal both with women's experiences and with underlying questions of what women are expected to be: mothers, wives, daughters, sisters as well as subject to objectification, scrutiny and unrealistic expectations. Esther Fuchs argues that the patriarchal framework of the Bible means women are prevented from becoming fully fledged human role models, while its androcentric perspective means that women are frequently limited to literary roles.[9] This issue is an attempt to address centuries of both patriarchal and androcentric ideologies which have sought to undermine and often demean biblical women by viewing them in light of Adam's helper (cf. Gen. 2:18) instead of marvelling at the ways in which biblical women are,

8 For example, see: Reinhartz, "Anonymity and Character in the Books of Samuel;" Beck, "The Narrative Function of Anonymity in Fourth Gospel Characterization;" Brenner, *I am. Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories*, 163–90; Searle, "Proper Names;" Trible, "An Unnanmed Woman;" Gafney, *Anonymous Women*.

9 Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," 138.

in fact fully able to be understood as humans who are integral to the stories of the Bible. Most of the time, this is achieved best by examining the afterlives of biblical women, but sometimes it is achieved by investigating the history of translation, or by applying a feminist- or queer-lens to the texts.

Furthermore, it is an attempt to address Frymer-Kensky's question posed at the beginning of this editorial: how *can* a book that teaches the common divine origin of all humanity and the sacred nature of human beings reflect a social order in which not only women, but LQBTQ+, BIPOC, disabled and socio-economically disadvantaged people are systematically disadvantaged and subordinated? One special issue of a journal cannot fully answer Frymer-Kensky's question. Nor can the decades of feminist biblical criticism which precede this issue. However, by drawing on those studies that have gone before and building upon them, it is hoped that we have – in a small way – demonstrated that there is a different way to "do" biblical scholarship which need not replicate traditional or conventional structures which uphold patriarchal and androcentric worldviews. This issue is not just an intellectual exercise or indeed, a spiritual exercise about understanding the Bible and its world; it is also a political exercise about understanding our own world and how it impacts our reading of the Bible. Such conversations are now, more than ever, vital to remind us of the need to challenge and dismantle hierarchical systems which undermine or oppress many.

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